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Bush Revises Views On 'Combat' in Iraq

'Major Operations' Over, President Says

By Dana Milbank and Bradley Graham
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President Bush, revising his earlier characterization of the fighting in Iraq, said in an interview released yesterday that combat operations are still underway in that country.

In an interview with the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service given on Thursday and released by the White House yesterday, Bush interrupted the questioner when asked about his announcement on May 1 of, as the journalist put it, "the end of combat operations."

"Actually, major military operations," Bush replied. "Because we still have combat operations going on." Bush added: "It's a different kind of combat mission, but, nevertheless, it's combat, just ask the kids that are over there killing and being shot at."

In his May 1 speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln, Bush declared: "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed. And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country." The headline on the White House site above Bush's May 1 speech is "President Bush Announces Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended."

Since then, a search of Bush speeches on the White House Web site indicates, the president had not spoken of the guerrilla fighting in Iraq as combat until this interview; he had earlier spoken of the "cessation of combat" in Iraq.

A White House spokesman said Bush was not making a distinction between combat and military operations. "What the president declared on May 1 is that major combat operations were over," he said. "He did not say that combat was over."

The description of active combat in Iraq was one of several statements Bush made in the interview that differed with earlier administration positions as he discussed his foreign policy while visiting a military facility in Miramar, Calif.

Asked about U.S. force presence in Afghanistan, Bush said the U.S. presence is being "gradually replaced" by other troops.

"We've got about 10,000 troops there, which is down from, obviously, major combat operations," he said. "And they're there to provide security and they're there to provide reconstruction help. But both those functions are being gradually replaced by other troops. Germany, for example, is now providing the troops for ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], which is the security force for Afghanistan, under NATO control. In other words, more and more coalition forces and friends are beginning to carry a lot of the burden in Afghanistan."

In fact, the 10,000 troops in Afghanistan represent the highest number of U.S. soldiers in the country since the war there began. By the time the Taliban government had been vanquished in December 2001, U.S. troops numbered fewer than 3,000 in Afghanistan. And three months later, in March 2002, when

the last major battle against remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda took place in eastern Afghanistan, about 5,000 U.S. troops were in the country.

Germany has participated in the 29-nation ISAF since January 2002. The 4,600 troops in ISAF provide security only in the Kabul area, and the United States, which is not part of ISAF, has operations throughout Afghanistan.

In the interview, Bush, asked about the burden on U.S. troops in Iraq, said other nations will be providing troops. "Polish troops are now moving in and will be in, I think, by September 4th of this year, which is in two weeks -- that's a major Polish contingent," he said. "There will be other nations going in to support not only the Polish contingent, but the British contingent."

The Poles have agreed to send 2,400 troops to lead a multinational division including 1,640 troops from Ukraine, 1,300 from Spain and smaller units expected from Hungary, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mongolia and the Philippines. The Pentagon has agreed to pay much of the cost of the Polish troops.

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